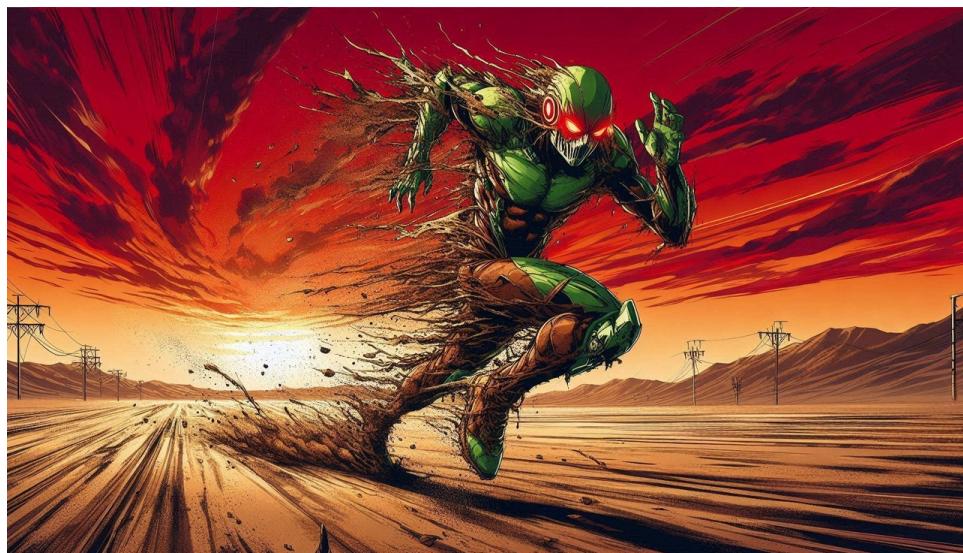




Prologue: The End, Again

It all starts with words. All I see now is the Crimson Ball of Destruction, looming ominously above, snuffing the life out of everything, reducing all to ash, and shattering the Earth into fragments. Over and over. No matter how many times I return, no matter how many allies I gather to fight it, the outcome remains unchanged. I watch my friends confront it while I stand paralyzed, their desperate attempts to save our world unfolding before my eyes as I do nothing but hope. But it all ends the same.

As I gaze back at the horizon, preparing to begin the cycle anew, a flicker of hope ignites within me—perhaps this time will be different. And then I run, faster and faster, my mind racing with thoughts of how it all began, what I could have done to prevent this catastrophe. But this is not my story. I am merely a pawn in this grand scheme. This is the story of my best friend, Ahnaf Sohail, and to unravel what transpired, we must start from the beginning.



Chapter - 1: A Perfect Life



Ahnaf jolts awake, breathless and drenched in sweat. Must have been a bad dream, he thinks, wiping the sweat from his forehead and running his hands through his deep black hair. He catches his reflection in the mirror—a 5'11" figure with beige skin, neither too skinny nor too bulky, just an average guy for his age.

His eyes scan the room, searching for his T-shirt to cover his bare chest. The room is a typical teenage mess—books and crumpled papers scattered across the floor, deep blue walls adorned with superhero posters. His gaze lands on the computer table near the window, where he had tossed his T-shirt the previous night after a long gaming session.

The digital clock reads 8:45 AM. He missed the alarm again. Quickly, he gets dressed and heads downstairs, drawn by the sound of his mom calling.



The year is September 22, 2018. Ahnaf lives in Leeds, United Kingdom, with his mom, Ruvana, a single mother. He never met his dad and never knew who he was. His mom always said that his father left them when Ahnaf was born.

The living room is small, with two couches and the news playing on the TV. The anchor is talking about how people with superpowers have become common in the USA, with "The Sentinel" arguing that it's a good thing for mankind. Sentinel is a superhero, tall and bulky, wearing a navy blue costume, orange boots, an orange belt, and a styled letter "S" on his chest. He has been the face of the USA since his debut fight in 1995, possessing powers of flight, eye rays, and superhuman strength. Some say he is even strong enough to cause earthquakes around the globe with his punches.

Sentinel is Ahnaf's role model. Ahnaf dreams of being someone like Sentinel someday, helping people in need just like him. But alas, superheroes exist only in the USA due to two catastrophic events in

late 1985 and 1995. During that time, parts of the USA were covered by a deep pink mist, with thunder raining throughout the day. Nobody knows what it was, as it is now hidden deep within the government. Since then, people have tried to replicate it and create their own superhuman beings but have failed to do so.



Today is a very special day for Ahnaf—it's his 18th birthday. He runs down to the living room, grabs the toast his mom made, and shouts, "Thank you, Ma!"

He rushes out the door with the toast in his mouth, trying not to miss the school bus. He gets on the bus just in time and his eyes meet with the love of his life, his girlfriend Kelly.

Kelly is a pale, blonde-haired British girl with striking blue eyes that sparkle like sapphires. Her hair cascades down her shoulders in soft waves, framing her delicate face. She has a slender build and stands almost as tall as Ahnaf, if not a bit shorter. Her skin is fair and

smooth, with a natural rosy tint on her cheeks that gives her a fresh, youthful appearance. She is wearing a light blue outfit that complements her graceful figure.

As she sits by the window, the sunlight cascades down her rose-petal-soft cheeks, highlighting her features. She looks him in the eye, smiles, and pats the seat next to her, showing that she has saved a spot for him.

Ahnaf and Kelly have been inseparable since they met two years ago. There is just something about them that feels like they were made for each other.



As Ahnaf sits next to Kelly, she leans in and whispers in his ear, "I have something for you."

Ahnaf, surprised and curious, asks with a smile on his face, "What is it?"

Kelly pulls out a small, wrapped gift box from her bag and hands it to him. "Come on, open it up!" she urges, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

He eagerly unwraps the box as the bus reaches their school. Inside, he finds a heart-shaped keychain. Ahnaf's face lights up with joy. He immediately hangs the keychain on his bag and turns to Kelly, his heart swelling with affection. He gently takes her hand and looks into her eyes, feeling a rush of emotions.

"Thank you so much, Kelly! You are the best!" he exclaims, his voice filled with genuine gratitude.

He pulls her into a warm embrace, feeling the softness of her skin against his. As they hug, he plants a tender kiss on her soft cheek, lingering for a moment to savor the closeness.

Kelly blushes, her cheeks turning a delicate shade of pink. She smiles and whispers, "I'm glad you like it. Happy birthday, Ahnaf."

They both walk down the bus steps, hand in hand, their fingers intertwined. The morning sun casts a golden glow on them as they make their way into the school. Ahnaf feels a sense of contentment and happiness, knowing that he has someone as special as Kelly by his side.

As they walk through the school gates, Ahnaf can't help but steal glances at Kelly, admiring her beauty and the way she makes him feel. They share a few laughs and playful banter, their connection growing stronger with each passing moment. The world around them fades away, and for a brief moment, it feels like it's just the two of them, wrapped in their own little bubble of young love and ready to start the day together.



After hours of boring classes, it's finally break time. Ahnaf heads to the cafeteria with Kelly. That's where I come in. I'm Eric, a black Afro-haired guy, and Ahnaf and I have been friends since kindergarten. Ahnaf has always been the silent type—he doesn't talk much, minds his own business, and is still the same. But one thing that brought us together more than ever is our shared fascination with superheroes.

Then Kelly came along, and we started spending less time together, except on weekends when the three of us hung out in various

places. Sometimes we go cycling, sometimes we watch movies, and sometimes we binge-watch series. The friendship I have with Ahnaf, as well as with Kelly, is a bond that will probably never break.



As I near Ahnaf, my eyes lock onto Fred, a 6ft tall guy with a beard, wearing a sports jacket. He's the quintessential bully. With a cup of coffee in his hand, he deliberately bumps into Ahnaf, spilling the coffee all over Ahnaf's T-shirt.

Ahnaf furiously screams, "What the hell, Fred! Watch where you're going!"

Fred grabs him by the collar, smirking as he looks into Ahnaf's eyes. "Maybe try not to be in my way next time, little guy," he sneers.



Here's something about Ahnaf: unlike others, he doesn't cower in fear, even if the person in front of him is stronger. It doesn't matter if he knows he's going to get pinned down; he'll still pack a punch. And he does exactly that. He shoves Fred hard towards a table. Fred stumbles but manages to keep his balance. Angrily, he grabs Ahnaf by the collar again and pulls him close, delivering a punch right to Ahnaf's face.

"Is that all you've got?" Ahnaf taunts, wiping the blood from his lip.

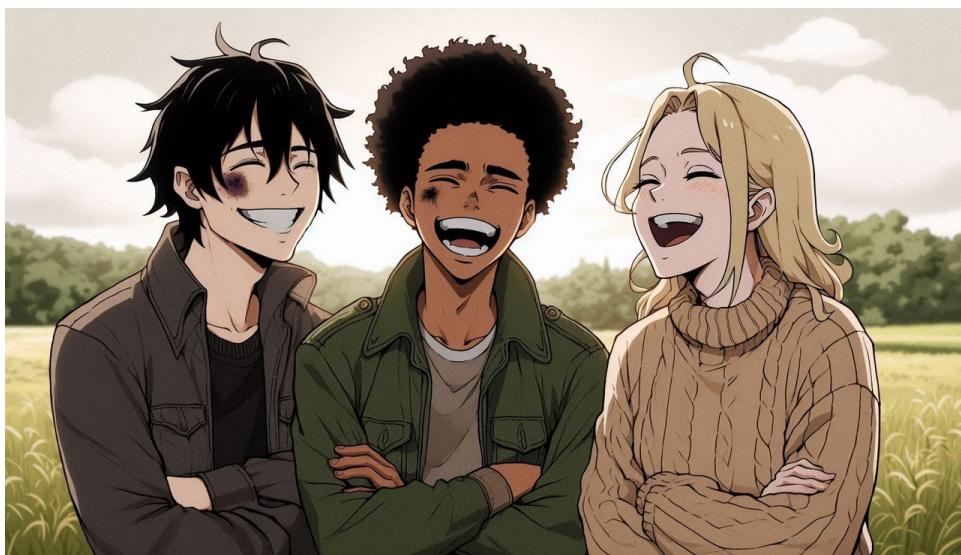
Fred's eyes narrow. "You're going to regret that," he growls, raising his fist for another punch.

That was it for me. I sprint towards them, leaping onto a cafeteria table and then onto Fred, wrapping my arm around his neck from behind. "Get off him, Fred!" I shout, tightening my grip.

Fred releases Ahnaf's collar and tries to pry my arm off his neck. "You're making a big mistake, Eric," he snarls, struggling to free himself.

The commotion sparks chaos in the cafeteria, with other students taking the opportunity to start a food fight. Amid the chaos, Kelly rushes to Ahnaf, who is still lying on the ground. She helps him up and they quickly leave the cafeteria. I follow suit, releasing Fred and making a swift exit.

The three of us ran outside the school, panting, sweating, smiling at each other and laughing.



"Dude!! NOW THAT WAS FUN!!" Ahnaf yelled.

Kelly drops a bit of water from her bottle onto her hankie and gently wipes the spot where Ahnaf was punched. She looks into his eyes, her voice soft and concerned, "Ahnaf, please don't do this again

next time. You know how Fred is. Why take fights you know you can't win?"

She frowns slightly, her worry evident. Ahnaf places his hands on her shoulders, looking deeply into her eyes and smiling reassuringly, "Because nobody else will."

She tries to say something, but Ahnaf silences her by placing his lips on hers, softly and tenderly. She closes her eyes, leaning into the kiss, feeling the warmth and love in his touch.



As they pull away, Kelly's cheeks are flushed, and she whispers, "Just promise me you'll be careful."

Ahnaf nods, his eyes filled with affection. "I promise," he says, brushing a strand of hair away from her face.

I cleared my throat, "Ahem!!"

They both quickly look at me and together ask, "What!?"

I glance at my watch and say, "Look, I know you both are busy and all, but the break is goi—" Just as I'm about to finish my sentence, the school bell rings. "Yup, there you have it, let's go," I say impatiently.

We three leave, with Ahnaf and Kelly holding hands, their fingers intertwined, ready to face the rest of the day together.

As school ends, I say goodbye to Ahnaf and Kelly since my house is near the school. Ahnaf and Kelly sit hand in hand next to each other on the bus as the sky slowly turns a deep orange, the sun setting down. The atmosphere feels heavy, almost foreboding. Ahnaf looks into the sky, his thoughts drifting to how perfect their lives seem and how many more memories they hope to make.

But there's an unsettling feeling in the air, a sense that something bad is about to happen. The bus ride is unusually quiet, the only sound being the hum of the engine and the occasional rustle of leaves outside. Ahnaf glances at Kelly, who seems lost in thought, her eyes reflecting the fading light.



As they near Ahnaf's home, the bus slows down. They both clap their hands and say goodbye to each other, but there's a lingering tension. Ahnaf steps off the bus, feeling a chill run down his spine. He watches the bus drive away, Kelly's silhouette disappearing into the distance.

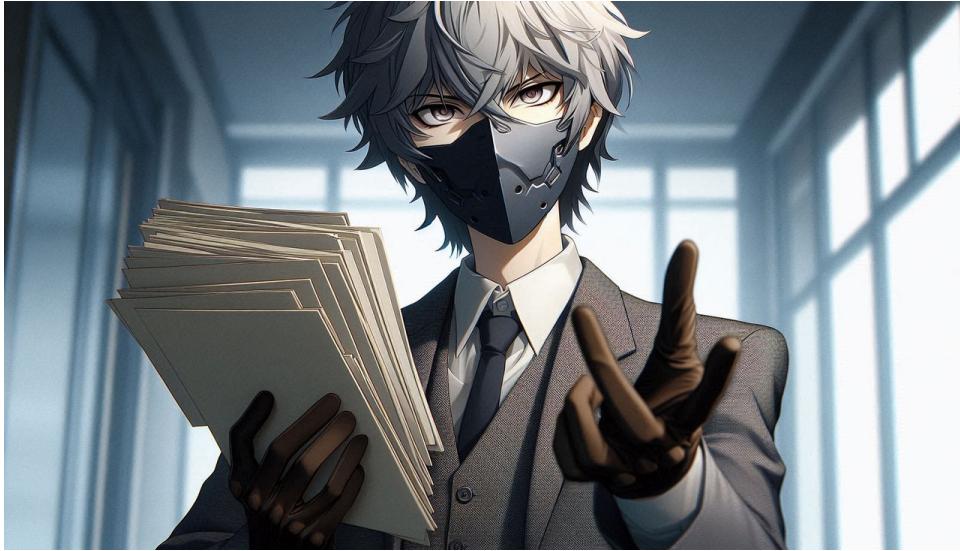
The sky darkens, and Ahnaf can't shake the feeling of impending doom. His heart races, and a primal fear grips him. He takes a deep breath and heads towards his house, the sense of unease growing with each step.



As Ahnaf moves towards the house, a strange sensation washes over him—a primal fear, as if something terrible is about to happen. His heart races as he approaches his house. When he opens the door, his face turns pale. In the living room, he sees his mom at gunpoint, held by two men wearing grey suits and black masks. One holds a piece of paper, while the other grips a silenced 9mm pistol.

The man with the paper in his hand screams, "We had a deal, lady! You give us our money back, and we let you live!"

His mom, tears streaming down her face, shouts in fear, "But I don't have it right now! Please, give me more time, I beg of you! Please!" She looks at Ahnaf, her eyes pleading for help.



Ahnaf had never seen his mom in such a dire situation. The men finally notice Ahnaf and point the pistol at him, motioning for him to close the door. Ahnaf, in a state of shock, complies out of fear. The men, even more furious, slap his mom across the face.

In that instant, something inside Ahnaf snaps. The fear and shock dissolve, replaced by a burning rage. His eyes blaze with anger as he runs into the living room, his face contorted with fury, tears streaming down his cheeks. All he can think about is grabbing the hand of the man who slapped his mother and breaking it apart.

"Get away from her!" Ahnaf roars, his voice trembling with emotion. He charges at the man with the pistol, his fists clenched, ready to fight. The man with the paper steps back, startled by Ahnaf's sudden aggression.

The man with the pistol turns his attention to Ahnaf, aiming the weapon at him. "Stay back, kid, or you'll regret it," he warns, but Ahnaf doesn't care. The sight of his mother in distress fuels his rage.



He rushes towards them, and just as he is about to close the gap between him and the two men, the pistol fires with a SNAP! Ahnaf loses his balance and falls, blood spilling from his chest. He touches his chest and looks at his hand, now crimson with blood. He has been shot.

As he starts losing consciousness, he hears a faint voice, "This was just a demo, Miss. Next time it will be his head if you don't show up with the money."

His mind drifts to memories of Kelly, her smile, her laughter, the way she looked at him with love in her eyes. He thinks of Eric, their shared adventures, their bond that felt unbreakable. He remembers

his mom, her sacrifices, her love, and how she always tried to protect him.

Tears well up in his eyes as he realizes he might never see them again. He feels a deep sorrow, not for himself, but for the pain his loss will cause them. He tries to hold on, to fight the darkness creeping in, but his strength is fading.

"Mom... Kelly... Eric..." he whispers, his voice barely audible. "I'm sorry..."

His mom's face is the last thing he sees before everything goes black. Her tear-streaked face, her eyes filled with fear and desperation. He wants to tell her that he loves her, that he's grateful for everything, but the words won't come.

His vision slowly turns black, and he struggles to keep his eyes open. He wonders to himself, Is this the end? Is this how I die? If it is, then what a perfect life it was...

